

Books and Comics

I learned to read when I was only four. I'm now seventy.

Over the years I've developed and enjoyed a love of books and comics, words and writing. As a small child I got a lot of my reading from libraries and another lot from second hand shops where old comics from the 1950s were two-a-penny or even less and books were something like sixpence or a shilling.

I read Gollancz science fiction in the yellow dust jackets and so-called "Silver Age" American comics from DC and Charlton and Alan Class and Atlas and ACG. I read British publications like The Beano, The Dandy, Topper and Beezer, Eagle, Look and Learn, Lion, Air Ace and "The Children's Newspaper". Then Atlas Comics turned into Marvel and the Marvel superheroes began. Fantastic Four, Spiderman, The Hulk, The Avengers, The X-Men, Iron man, Doctor Strange.

The exciting thing about comics was that it stimulated two different parts of the brain at the same time, the part which understands the written word and the part which understands sequences of visual images.

In those days comics were almost entirely genre based but the superhero story was a meta-genre, a blending and changing and cross pollinating of other genres. The writers would throw in a bit of detective fiction, a bit of magic, a bit of horror, a dollop of SF, a pinch of soap opera, a dash of explorer fiction, a bit of romance, a fragment of war story, a shake of comedy etc. The result could be something like a detective who uses a magic amulet and a spaceship to fight a war against a talking kangaroo with a mutated genius brain and a crazy plan to rule the world. The detective is aided by a cowboy and a jungle girl.

The history of these sort of stories goes all the way back to the earliest human societies, sitting around a campfire at the mouth of the cave, hearing tales of the strange and the unusual, tales of gods, monsters and heroes. We are storytelling creatures. Fish swim, birds fly, humans tell stories.

In Stan Lee's version of it at Marvel Comics there was a sense of Mexican wrestlers fighting Shakespearean actors to prevent atomic scientists from taking over the world or the universe or something. Stan Lee was important because he began to change the simplistic idea of "good guys and bad guys" into something a little deeper and more human seeming. Stan Lee's heroes were misunderstood. Some of the heroes used to be villains. Some heroes were carrying the weight of financial worries and family troubles at home. Some of the villains might want to reform. There were grey areas.

Stan Lee also began to introduce black characters in defiance of the racist Comics Code Authority which had tried to censor E.C. Comics out of business altogether just a few short years before. E.C. had survived just by the skin of its teeth by its publisher Bill Gaines stopping publication of almost all of its comics and concentrating on just one single magazine: MAD. Mad Magazine was able to survive without advertising and without the Comics Code emblem. Bad things had been happening in the American comics industry

during the Cold War years of the fifties after Dr. Wertham's damning Seduction of the Innocent and the accusation that comics were destroying the youth of America. D.C. Comics had survived by eating its rivals such as Quality Comics and Fawcett Comics. Fawcett had been the publishers of Captain Marvel and the whole Marvel Family. D.C. destroyed them with a lawsuit claiming that Captain Marvel was a rip-off of Superman. Stan Lee was working at Atlas Comics where they stopped publishing superheroes for a few years until Stan could persuade his boss to try it again in spite of D.C. and the Comics Code. Really. Very much in spite of them.

Meanwhile the more adult orientated followed in Mad Magazines footsteps avoiding the Comics Code censorship and the dependence on some kinds of advertising. Thus hippy underground comics came into existence alongside of horror magazines like Creepy and Eerie, graphic story manifestations of the old pulps and penny dreadfuls.

The artwork was important. The publishing companies would sell a lot more copies if they had Murphy Anderson, Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, Gene Colan, Alex Toth, Neal Adams, Jim Steranko, Wally Wood, Gil Kane, Gray Morrow, Frank Frazetta, and all the terrific illustrators of the American comics. In British comics the legends were Frank Hampson and Frank Bellamy and lots of cartoonists that we didn't necessarily know the names of but who were certainly influenced by Ronald Searle, Charles Addams and others. At D.C. Thomson in Scotland and Odhams Press in London there tended to be a generic style of cartoon stories about naughty children and eccentric grown-ups. We also had little comic magazines called "Picture Libraries" and these included the wonderful Air Ace comics telling stories of World War Two and The Battle of Britain.

Our annuals came out once per year in time for Christmas, unlike American comic "annuals" which came out whenever they felt like it and should have been called "specials" rather than annuals. That was an example of the American attitude to the English language in which they think that it doesn't matter where words come from or what they really mean. Some American comics had the most bizarre spelling such as the word "through" spelled as "thru" or "night" spelled as "nite". The writers were obviously influenced by the fanatical ideas of Benjamin Franklin and Noah Webster. At this stage I turn purple in the face, steam comes out of my ears and I begin shouting about "Bunch of bloody GUYS! Bunch of bloody latter-day Guy Fawkes types! Hrrmmphh!" Ahem. But I digress...

My dad's friend from work gave me his collection of Galaxy Science Fiction magazines and I began to follow several of the digest size SF magazines like Analog (which spelled its name in what we in England would call the "wrong" spelling of the English word "Analogue") and The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction and New Worlds and Impulse.

I spent a huge amount of my childhood reading Robert Silverberg and Roger Zelazny, Frederik Pohl and Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clark and Philip K. Dick, Michael Moorcock, Brian Aldiss, Fritz Leiber and Hal Clement and Avram Davidson and so many, many more.

I read humour type of things such as the Jennings and Darbshire books by Anthony Buckeridge and the historical humour of Sellar and Yeatman. Also Mad Magazine.

As I got older I broadened my mind quite deliberately, reading other books beyond the range of humour and science fiction. At that time I still felt intimidated by Dickens and Shakespeare but I could stretch to George Orwell, C. S. Lewis, Tolkien and Mervyn Peake. I also read a

very large range of non-fiction encompassing science subjects and philosophy, history, religion, art techniques, mysticism and the occult.

I made a special effort to read a biography of Mayor Daley of Chicago and Hitler's Mein Kampf specifically because neither of them interested me in the slightest, were both extremely boring reads and were way, way out of my comfort zone. In both cases I cheated and only skimmed them. I forced myself to read a dreadful clichéd gothic romance the name of which I forgot but which I finished with a feeling of "There! I've done that genre. That gets that out of the way!"

I read a lot of H. G. Wells including his social commentary romance novel The Passionate Friends which, surprisingly, I enjoyed.

I used to walk around reading from paperback books as I went along the street. I was very like 21st Century young people who walk around looking at their text messages on their mobile phones. I almost always had a science fiction or other paperback in my jacket pocket and would take the book out and continue reading at every opportunity. I developed the ability to use my peripheral vision to avoid bumping into people or lampposts. I could navigate through a crowd without looking up. When I didn't have a book with me I still tended to slouch and look downwards at the pavement as I walked. I only looked up when there was something interesting like a horse or someone in weird clothes.

As a teenager I had over 2,000 comics in a cupboard in my bedroom. Steranko's History of Comics was a treasured possession and so were the various fanzines and prozines such as Fantasy Advertiser, Aspect/Orpheus and Wally Wood's prozine Witzend.

By the age of 20 I had lost interest in comics. The hippy underground comics were amusing but all of the British and American things I had read as child had become boring to me. Marvel Comics and other companies were leaning heavily toward the fierce, the savage and the violent and I didn't like it much. The stories had lost their charm. I didn't like Wolverine or Conan the Barbarian. Even the the newer DC Comics with artwork by Neal Adams, Alex Toth, Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko which, only a couple of years before, had been SO GOOD had begun to get less interesting. I attributed this to growing up. I stopped watching television at the same time.

Books I remember being particularly drawn to in my early twenties included Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan, We Are the People Our Parents Warned Us Against by Nicholas von Hoffman and The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test by Tom Wolfe.

I was hypnotised and brainwashed in a pseudo-religious cult for nearly seven years, early 1974 to late 1980, and they messed with my mind quite considerably but they never stopped me from reading books. In fact, the long journeys from Morden in Surrey to the meetings in North London provided me with long hours of reading time on the Northern Line of the Underground. I got through a lot of books during those years. I also read whenever possible while at work. For instance, working in garages and filling stations on various rotating shifts gave me time to read while I was waiting for customers to drive in. During that time I read Worlds in Collision and Ages in Chaos by Immanuel Velikovsky, The Thirteenth Tribe and The Roots of Coincidence by Arthur Koestler, The Meaning of Relativity by Albert Einstein,

The ABC of Relativity by Bertrand Russell, the English translation of The Koran, The Dhammapada, extracts from The Bhagavad Gita, some extracts from the writings and speeches of Freud and Jung, Winnie the Pooh and The House at Pooh Corner, lots of Michael Moorcock and Brian Aldiss, The Committed Men by M. John Harrison and various books on anatomy, physiology, biology, biochemistry, DNA molecules, acupuncture, electricity and magnetism, physics and many other things.

Books saved me from boredom or depression on many occasions.

When I got away from that pseudo-religious cult in 1980 my reading continued in a similar way. In the 1980s I read a lot of anarchist and mutualist literature but also psychology and fiction. I read The Outsider (or L'Etranger) by Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre's Nausea. I read the William Gibson Cyberpunk Trilogy: Neuromancer, Count Zero and Mona Lisa Overdrive and was really looking forward to getting onto the internet.

Eventually I did get online but it wasn't until 1995. I also read other cyberpunk things like The Difference Engine (steampunk really) and Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology. I read the first few books in Anne Rice's vampire series and enjoyed them even though the gothic and horror had never held much attraction for me until then. Technology had always been more exciting (to me) than spirits and monsters.

In those days I had never been to see a horror film because I believed that morbidity was psychologically damaging to a person. The Anne Rice books were different. Written with intelligence, subtlety, care and feeling they reward the reader by expanding the mind. Very different to the mental image I had of "horror" as mindless slasher nonsense.

In 1987 I was visiting my friend Alby Stone (a writer! Look for his books on Kindle) in London and I noticed that Alby had a copy of Swamp Thing #56 ("My Blue Heaven"). "Hmm. Swamp Thing, is that good?" I asked. Alby replied that it was.

That was the trigger to me getting back into comics. From then onwards to the present day my love of comics has grown once again. When Alan Moore was still writing comics he achieved something that was also achieved by Pablo Picasso, David Bowie, Samuel Beckett, Michael Moorcock and, more recently, Charlie Brooker. He managed to de-construct his artform at the same time as he was still doing it. That's the best way to do any form of art.

Bowie deconstructed rock and roll while still doing rock and roll. Picasso deconstructed visual art while still doing visual art. Samuel Beckett deconstructed theatre while still doing theatre. Michael Moorcock deconstructed science fiction and fantasy while still doing science fiction and fantasy. Charlie Brooker deconstructs television while still doing television. Alan Moore did it with comics and then moved on. Read his more recent books. He's amazing. Writers I follow these days include many who write, or have written comics. Writers like Kieron Gillen, Ed Brubaker, Dan Slott, Brian Michael Bendis, Warren Ellis, Grant Morrison, Jeff Lemire, Mike Mignola, The Brothers Hernandez, Eddie Campbell, Posie Simmonds and, of course, Alan Moore. Good thing I happened to see that Swamp Thing issue at Alby's. In 2024, as I write this, I now own a huge collection of digital comics from places like Humble Bundle, Comixology, Kindle and Drive-Thru-Comics etc.

As I got older I became less intimidated by Dickens and Shakespeare and my range of reading expanded to include both of these along with John Steinbeck, Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Jane Austen, Langston Hughes, Graham Greene, Daphne Du Maurier, Liu Cixin, Haruki Murakami, Guy De Maupassant, Kingsley Amis, Martin Amis, Iain Banks, Evelyn Waugh, G. K. Chesterton, Aldous Huxley, Umberto Eco, Primo Levi, Italo Calvino, Doris Lessing, and nearly everything ever published by George Orwell.

I've always preferred prose to poetry though I enjoy good song writing or rap and hip hop and have a few treasured poems such as Desiderata and Ozymandias. I have been very greatly influenced in my own writing by unusual and experimental forms such as Beelzebub's Tales to his Grandson by Gurdjieff, Finnegan's Wake by James Joyce, Barefoot in the Head by Brian Aldiss and the work of Samuel Beckett. New Worlds SF, when it was edited by Michael Moorcock, was very inspiring, breaking away from conventional storytelling forms to explore hybrids of poetry, prose, stream of consciousness, blackout art, concrete poetry and comics. If you have a collection of New Worlds SF on the shelf next to a collection of Ambit Magazine you have an Aladdin's cave of ideas and provoking, entrancing, enriching art.

Mythology has always been of great interest to me. In the 1980s I took a one-year course of Drama & Movement with studies of Myths, Legends and Fairy Tales. In the 1990s I did a degree in Fine Art and the thesis paper that I wrote was titled "Mythologies, Ancient and Modern". It drew upon sources beginning with Roland Barthes and Joseph Campbell. When I was in my fifties I began to need reading glasses and so I found it useful to read books with my ears more often than with my eyes. The particular irritation of reading glasses is the continual taking them off and putting them on again, depending on whether I need to focus on close objects or far. So I began to be a lover of audio books and podcasts.